



University Student Senate
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**TESTIMONY OF THE
CUNY UNIVERSITY STUDENT SENATE
BEFORE THE
JOINT LEGISLATIVE HEARING ON 2020-21 EXECUTIVE BUDGET PROPOSAL
ON HIGHER EDUCATION
February 4, 2020
Albany, N.Y.**

Good afternoon, my name is Timothy Hunter. I am the Chairperson of the CUNY University Student Senate (USS) and the student Trustee on the City University's Board of Trustees. Founded in 1972 with the mission of preserving the accessibility, affordability, and excellence of higher education within the CUNY, the organization is charged with protecting the rights of the student body and promoting the general welfare of its student constituents and the University. The USS delegates are responsible for the representative governance of the 500,000 students of the 25 CUNY campuses.

A COLLEGE DEGREE IS THE NEW HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA

New York State must provide New Yorkers with access to a college education degree that will help them succeed in life and benefit the economy at large. A college degree is necessary for any individual who intends to thrive in our economy. Research from Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce shows that for millions of growing jobs in the US, many of them will require more than just a high school diploma. The data from the Center shows that

- 35 percent of job openings will require at least a bachelor's degree
- 30 percent will require some college or an associate, and
- 36 percent of jobs will require education beyond high school¹

In a statement, the former U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, while pleading for making college more affordable, said that "America's students and families need, and the nation's economic strength will depend on, a higher education system that helps all students succeed. College is more important – but more expensive – than ever before."²

¹ "Recovery: Job Growth and Education Requirements Through 2020." *CEW Georgetown*, 31 Jan. 2018, cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/recovery-job-growth-and-education-requirements-through-2020/

² "Fact Sheet: Focusing Higher Education on Student Success." *Fact Sheet: Focusing Higher Education on Student Success | U.S. Department of Education*, 27 July 2015, www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/fact-sheet-focusing-higher-education-student-success.

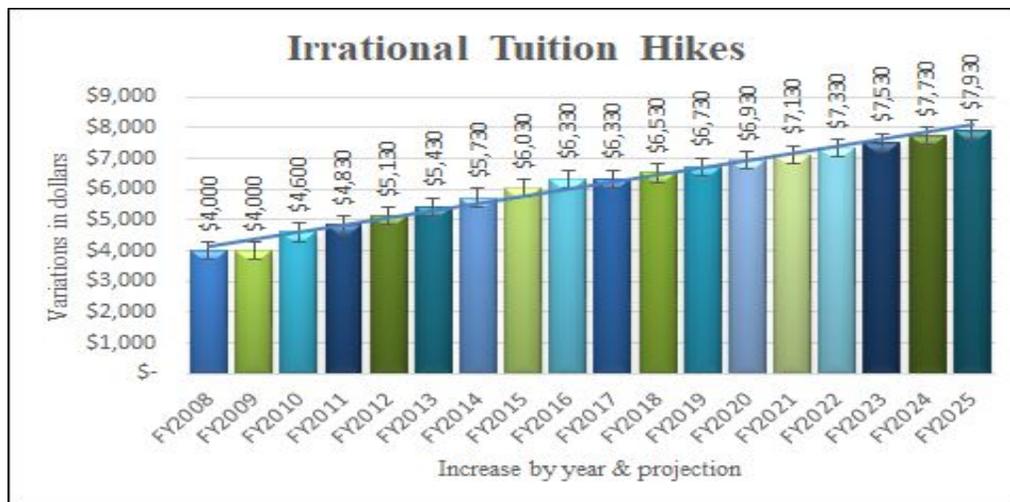


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SUNY 2020: IRRATIONAL TUITION HIKES

In 2011, Governor Cuomo and the State Legislature passed NY SUNY 2020.³ Dubbed the new 'rational tuition program' for SUNY and CUNY, it enacted increased tuition annually at SUNY and CUNY by \$300 per year for five years. Initially, the Governor and State Legislature promised the increased tuition would go towards enhancing student services; less crowded classrooms, more academic mentoring, and more counseling and advising available for students. In addition, SUNY 2020 included an important provision known as the "maintenance of effort," which stipulated that the legislature would not reduce SUNY's or CUNY's general operating funds in following budgets. This was to ensure that increased tuition would not be offset by decreased state support. However, the "maintenance of effort" provision excludes certain mandatory, predictable cost increases. Actions by the legislature to amend this underscores that the SUNY2020 law does not keep whole the systems' general operating funds, consistent with the law's stated intention.⁴

A recent report by the New York Public Interest Research Group [conservatively] estimates the tuition price tag for SUNY 2020 has cost students \$2.5 billion in additional public college tuition payments. While the promise from the state was that students would have to cough up more money every year to enhance student services on their campus; the report highlights that, in fact, did not occur. Instead, the increased tuition went to fill in state budget gaps.⁵



Due to stagnant state support, student groups and faculty unions alike have shared stories at various hearings throughout the state, citing library hour cuts, limited course offerings which further delay students from graduating on time, and hiring freezes across the board, to name a few. While tuition has

³ Governor Cuomo Signs NYSUNY 2020 Legislation, see: <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-cuomo-signs-nysuny-2020-legislation>

⁴ News Release, NYPIRG ESTIMATES TUITION PRICE TAG FOR SUNY 2020: STUDENTS PAY \$2.5 BILLION IN ADDITIONAL PUBLIC COLLEGE TUITION PAYMENTS, see: https://www.nypirg.org/pubs/201910/higher_ed_news_merged_10-22-19_FINAL.pdf

⁵ *Ibid*



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gone up more than 42% since 2011, it's clear the money is not being invested in student support services, but instead, footing the bill where the state refuses to. On June 24, 2019, at the final Board of Trustees meeting where CUNY's budget was up for a vote (including another tuition hike), CUNY's CFO, Michael Sapienza stated that the budget required senior colleges to set aside funds for future labor costs from collective bargaining contracts.⁶ Despite the recent contract for faculty being finalized and the decision being made to use tuition revenue for labor reserves, adjuncts, who teach more than half the courses at CUNY, will still receive meager pay.

Cassandra Murray, an adjunct from Hunter College and Graduate Teaching Fellow at the CUNY Graduate Center for the past three years, details her experience below:

“There are various issues I could address, including consistently broken and even dangerous facilities, underfunded and completely unfunded learning centers and labs, overcrowded classes, lack of books and supplies, class cancellations, and technological shortfalls (all of which occurs as CUNY tuition continues to rise). I have been committed to teaching at CUNY for a long time now... yet, I am on the verge of quitting. The state, city, and the CUNY administration together have made it nearly impossible for me to continue on in a meaningful career that I love because I literally cannot afford to survive in the city in which I work, and there appears to be little hope of obtaining a living wage in the future. I currently reside in an apartment with poor living conditions, but I can't afford to move to a better apartment given the high rents in NYC. The cost of living in NYC combined with the student loans I have accumulated from attending SUNY and CUNY schools keeps me up at night and on edge throughout the day, thus working for CUNY also takes a toll on my physical and mental health.”

The Executive proposal would authorize a tuition rate increase of no more than \$200 per year through AY 2024-25. Students should not have to pay more money to sit in labor reserves, or fill in holes where the state refuses to. Students in NYC are already food insecure.⁷ They are already housing insecure.⁸ Our students cannot afford another round of tuition hikes.

- **We reject the renewal of NY SUNY 2020 and ask the State Legislature to oppose any new tuition hikes through AY 2024-25.**
- **We ask that the Legislature consider freezing tuition at senior colleges and ultimately move to a free CUNY.**

⁶ CUNY Board of Trustees 2019 Archive, see: <https://www.cuny.edu/about/trustees/meetings-of-the-board/meeting-broadcasts/video-archive-for-2019/>

⁷ NY Times, Tuition or Dinner? Nearly Half of College Students Surveyed in a New Report Are Going Hungry, see: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/02/nyregion/hunger-college-food-insecurity.html>

⁸ Young Invincibles, “I KNOW WHAT’S AT STAKE” How Homelessness Impacts College Success in New York City, see: https://younginvincibles.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/YoungInvincibles_Homelessness_College_Success_NYC.pdf



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INCREASED TUITION MEANS INCREASING THE TAP GAP

For students who receive full Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) awards, CUNY is required legally to cap tuition at the maximum TAP award level (\$5,165). The difference between CUNY's full-time tuition (\$6,930) and the charge to students who receive state financial aid is covered by a TAP waiver. To reiterate, instead of students paying the difference, individual colleges eat the difference, resulting in a widening gap known as the TAP gap. This corrosive gap has fiscally squeezed the university. Due to the TAP gap, most campuses now offer limited course offerings, prolonging the time it would take for a student to graduate, cuts to library hours, cuts to ethnic studies, crowded classrooms, and the university is ever-increasing its reliance on part-time, poorly paid adjuncts.

At John Jay College of Criminal Justice, budget cuts to the Africana Studies Department mean that in the past six years the department has been unable to hire new faculty members. Roughly ten years ago, the department had eleven full time faculty members. Since then, the Africana Studies Department has had a steady increase in students. Their minors program more than doubled and they serve over 1,000 students. Yet, they only have six full time faculty members. These faculty members not only teach but create programming and advise their students. As a result, the Africana Studies Department is unable to offer all the courses displayed in their course catalog.

In addition, the Department of Africana Studies at Lehman college will have to offer a significantly reduced amount of courses for the Spring 2020 semester. The department just finalized their Spring schedule and cited a reduction in \$20,000 in their adjunct budget. This means the department cannot pay for the same amount of classes that were offered last Spring. To provide additional context; Lehman's Department of Africana Studies had been able to offer numerous courses on Saturdays in Spring 2019, however, they will only be able to offer one class this Spring. This is harmful for many students, who cite lack of course offerings being the reason why they cannot fulfill their requirements in a timely manner, and delays them for graduating.

All TAP students receive a tuition credit based on their income- with higher-income students receiving the lowest credit and lower-income students, who receive a maximum TAP award, getting the highest credit to fully cover the cost of their tuition. It is key to note that CUNY has significantly more TAP recipients receiving the full grant based on a family income at or below the poverty line. Sixty percent of CUNY students report an annual household income of less than \$30,000.⁹ While SUNY has more of a total number of recipients who receive TAP since the university has approximately forty percent more students than CUNY, SUNY students receive significantly less in grant amounts on average. Next year the TAP gap at CUNY is estimated at 80 million, SUNY is estimated at 70 million. So despite having 40

⁹ CUNY Student Experience Survey 2016, see:

https://www.cuny.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/page-assets/about/administration/offices/oira/institutional/surveys/2016_SES_Highlights_Updated_web_ready.pdf



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percent more students, the gap is about 13 percent greater at CUNY. Again the explanation is the far greater numbers of students enrolled at CUNY at or below the poverty line. To emphasize our point; the TAP gap forces colleges to have to make up the difference between tuition and the maximum TAP award to ensure that the poorest students don't pay tuition. This means that schools, particularly at CUNY who serve the poorest students in the state, have to eat about two grand per poor student. It's not about the overall number of TAP recipients, but about where the greatest needs are.

OPPORTUNITY PROGRAMS ARE VITAL SERVICES FOR THE MOST VULNERABLE STUDENTS IN NEW YORK STATE

Opportunity Programs at CUNY are vital to support the inclusion and educational success of underrepresented groups in higher education.¹⁰ These programs include the College Discovery (CD) and Percy Ellis Sutton Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge (SEEK) opportunity programs, and the Single Stop College Initiative. CUNY has been a national leader in pioneering innovative programs to expand education access for students from underrepresented communities by pairing them individually with intensive support to keep them on track and help them graduate. SEEK and CD are the forerunners. The Governor's 2021 Executive proposal maintains prior year funding for various opportunity programs. While we are grateful for the steady funding from the Governor's budget, however, with additional state money, CUNY can have more students served under these successful programs. **We request that the Legislature provide additional funding for these vital services to be expanded.**

SEEK and CD, with it's visionary model, paved the way to more recent initiatives, such as CUNY's highly successful Accelerated Study in Associate Program (ASAP), which has been nationally recognized due to its high graduation and retention rate gains. The program helps students earn associate degrees within three years by providing a range of financial, academic, and personal support including comprehensive and personalized advisement, career counseling, tutoring, waivers for tuition and mandatory fees, MetroCards, and additional financial assistance to defray the cost of textbooks.¹¹ A recent study by MDRC, a nonprofit research group, looked into three Ohio community colleges that adopted CUNY's ASAP and nearly doubled three-year graduation rates while increasing transfers to four-year colleges by 50 percent.¹² The data is clear; ASAP works. While the program is city instituted, last year the state had provided additional funds for ASAP. However, in his 2021 Executive proposal, the Governor cut \$2.5 million of the additional funds. **We request the Legislature restores \$2.5 million back to ASAP, which is a nationally recognized model with a highly successful track record.**

¹⁰ CUNY Office of Special Programs, see: <https://www.cuny.edu/current-students/student-affairs/special-programs/>

¹¹ CUNY ASAP, see: <http://www1.cuny.edu/sites/asap/>

¹² MDRC, Ohio Programs Based on CUNY's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) Nearly Double Three-Year Graduation Rates, Increase Transfers to Four-Year Colleges, see: <https://www.mdrc.org/news/press-release/ohio-programs-based-cuny-s-accelerated-study-associate-programs-asap-nearly>



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EXPANSION CAPITAL MATCHING PROGRAM

CUNY has not had a five-year capital plan since 2008. While last year's budget included \$834 million in critical maintenance, no new revenue had been approved for the construction of new buildings. In addition, CUNY had not received significant increased revenue for critical maintenance projects, leading to ceilings leaking and bathrooms in disrepair. At the CUNY Board of Trustees annual Manhattan Borough Hearing, on the topic of the 2019 CUNY budget, Susan Semel, a professor at the City College of New York, stated in her testimony that her building in CCNY, the North Academic Center, "is in a constant state of decay," with elevators and escalators not working properly, soap and toilet paper often being unavailable in the bathrooms, bathrooms flooding and the cleaning staff being overwhelmed due to being "cut to the bone."¹³

Recently, Sakia Fletcher, the Student Government President of Medgar Evers, cited temporary portable trailers that were installed roughly twenty years ago, still being used for classes till this very day. *"What do these "temporary" portable trailers represent? They represent 20 plus years of disappointment and failure. These portable trailers represent educational racism and segregation that exists in CUNY. They remind students of color that the state is not willing to invest in the educational infrastructure expansion of black students. Ultimately, the Medgar Evers College portable classroom trailers represent the State's blatant disregard and neglect in finding capital investments at predominantly black institutions in New York."*

This year, the Governor's proposal includes an expansion capital matching program that includes \$200 million for CUNY for a 2:1 strategic needs capital matching program that would require individual campuses contribute \$1 for every \$2 invested by the State. We applaud the Governor for including funds for new capital projects, however, we are concerned for schools that aren't as equipped to fundraise. Schools like York College and Medgar Evers, with higher populations of black students, generally fundraise less than schools with higher populations with caucasian and asian students. While schools like Queens College and Baruch College may flourish, other campuses will suffer. In one of the largest urban universities in the world, equity must be prioritized; campuses with lack of fundraising abilities should not be overlooked, but supported by state funding.

INCREASE BASE AID FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Community colleges educate and prepare students for the workforce in addition to creating a foundation for students to transition to senior colleges. Maintaining and funding them are vital to student success; state education law mandates that the state shall pay 40 percent of the operating costs of these campuses,

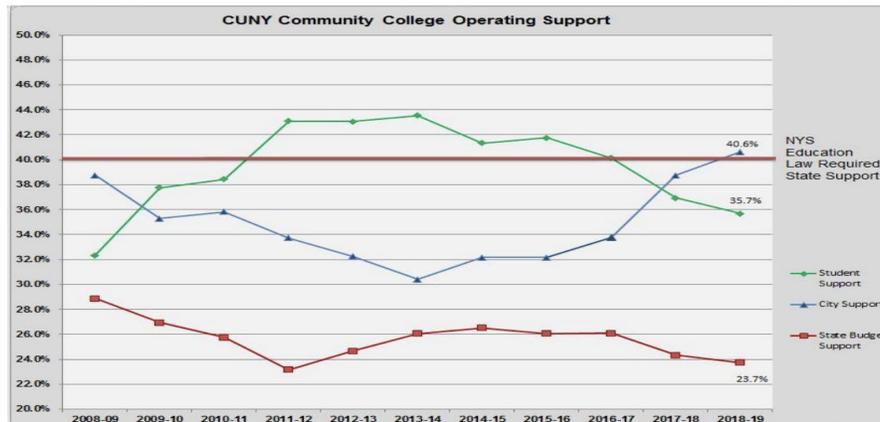
¹³ Baruch College Ticker, *Stirring testimonies electrify CUNY Board of Trustees meeting*, see: <https://theticker.org/archive/stirring-testimonies-electrify-cuny-board-of-trustees-meeting>



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however, the state is not meeting its obligation. Instead, CUNY community college students are paying the majority of operating costs at their campuses.

Graph from NYSUT



As soon from the graph above, from 2008-9 to 2018-19, CUNY community colleges paid an increase from 32.3 percent to 40.6 percent, while the states share decreased from 28.9 percent to 23.7 percent.

The Executive Budget maintains base operating aid for community colleges at \$2,947 per full-time equivalent (FTE) student, the same as SFY 2019-20. However, the 98 percent funding floor that was included in the SFY 2019-20 Enacted Budget is not continued. This results in a decrease of \$3.6 million in base aid from SFY 2019-2020, which the Governor attributes to declines in enrollment. **We ask the Legislature to include an increase in community college funding by \$250 per student FTE and re-establish the 98 percent funding floor at the 2018-19 level.**

While we are happy College Discovery was not cut, we are discouraged to see funding for child care centers at community colleges reduced from \$902,000 to \$813,100. According to the Institute for Women's Policy Research, parents with dependent children drop out of college at a higher rate than any other demographic, with only 33 percent of students with children obtaining a degree or certificate within six years.¹⁴ Seventeen percent of CUNY's degree-seeking students at community colleges and 11 percent of students at senior colleges are parents.¹⁵ **We are requesting that the final budget restores the cuts made to child care centers at CUNY community colleges.**

REFORM THE DREAM ACT

We thank the Legislature, again, for passing the Jose Peralta DREAM Act last year. As with any new program, there are glitches that occur in the beginning that should be addressed. Overall, 47,000 people in

¹⁴ Institute for Women's Policy Research, Student Parent Success Initiative, see: <https://iwpr.org/issue/employment-education-economic-change/student-parent-success-initiative/#lates%20publications>

¹⁵ City Council Response to State Budget: https://council.nyc.gov/budget/wp-content/uploads/sites/54/2019/04/Fiscal-2020-Preliminary-Budget-Response_FINAL.pdf



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New York City are eligible to benefit from the DREAM Act, the bulk of whom reside in Queens.¹⁶ So far, it is unknown how much financial aid has been awarded to undocumented students since its initial roll out. HESC President Guillermo Linares stated that data on how many students have applied is yet to be available.

While we don't have those numbers yet, we do know students who have been denied due to the programs rigid requirements. Enrique Pena, a Queens College student and an immigration activist who was in Albany at the time the DREAM act was passed, is one of the students who have been rejected. *"In order to qualify for the DREAM Act, students must have attended high school for a minimum of two years. However, I was in high school for a year and a half, so I did not qualify. This unnecessary, rigid requirement has created a barrier for me to attend CUNY, which has been, time after time, touted as the most affordable university in the nation. But if you're a dreamer who, for some reason, did not qualify for the DREAM Act, like myself, then CUNY isn't affordable by any means."*

- **We ask the high school requirement be amended from 2 years of high school needed to a high school diploma in the U.S., needed.**
- **We ask that the DREAM Act be amended or that stand alone legislation is introduced so that students can receive payment and scholarships from student activity fees.**

OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

The Governor's proposal included maintained levels at \$4 million for Open Educational Resources (OER) at CUNY. We applaud the Governor for maintaining this crucial program, which is paving the way for a more affordable college experience for many students. OER are free online textbooks that professors adopt into their curriculum. Instead of working to pay for hundreds of dollars for books, students can focus on studying with their online textbook, free of charge! Majority of all CUNY campuses have a designated OER Coordinator working with faculty to adopt the online curriculum into their classrooms. Student governments have passed resolutions calling for faculty to actively seek out lessons on how to transition into OER. **This program is working and will benefit CUNY in the long run.**

EXCELSIOR SCHOLARSHIP:

The CUNY USS, on behalf of the CUNY students, commend Governor Cuomo's decision to expand the Excelsior Scholarship so more students can attend public university for free. As stated in the 2021 budget, under this proposal, the income threshold would increase to \$135,000 in Academic Year (AY) 2020-21 and \$150,000 in AY 2021-22. This decision will allow students – middle-class students and their families – to spend less money on getting a college degree. However, the issue of college affordability remains

¹⁶ The Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, see: <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/immigrants/downloads/pdf/NYS-Dream-Act-Fact-Sheet-2019.pdf>



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since the vast majority of students from low-income families who need the program still cannot take advantage of this opportunity for various reasons regarding the requirements barriers.

- The Excelsior Scholarship required all applicants to comply with a yearly successful 30-credits requirement (15 credits per semester), which in itself constitutes a barrier when, in fact, just 18 percent of all CUNY students took at least 30 credits in 2016-17.¹⁷
- The Excelsior Scholarship only covers regular sessions such as spring and fall, but will not cover tuition for summer and winter, which does not give students room to fulfill the 30-credits requirement.¹⁸ Nontraditional students, like most at CUNY, are forced to take 15 credits per semester in order to fulfill the 30 credit per AY requirement. This is not feasible for most. **We recommend allowing Excelsior to cover summer and winter courses, so students can maintain their jobs, families, and duties in addition to taking classes.**
- The Excelsior Scholarship does not cover food, housing, travel for school-related activities, books, other school materials, or anything that can allow a student to stay on track academically.
- **Excelsior does not help low-income students.**
 - The poorest students at CUNY already receive financial aid from Pell and TAP to cover full costs of tuition (Pell can give additional money to pay for hidden costs like textbooks and travel). Excelsior is a last dollar scholarship that only goes to students who have tuition balances left after exhausting all other aid.
- **Excelsior benefits students from families that are “upper” low-income and middle-income.**
 - Students from families with taxable incomes of between \$80,000 and \$125,000 are in the sweetest spot to receive the scholarship. At \$80,000+ in taxable income, families generally phase out of eligibility for Pell or TAP. For these students, Excelsior flips the script from a full tuition bill to none.¹⁹ Data from HESC reported that in its initial year, Excelsior provided significantly more benefits to students at colleges serving majority middle-income and near-middle-income students than colleges serving majority low-income students.²⁰

¹⁷ Silberstein, Rachel. “New York’s Excelsior Scholarships Rise 20 Percent, but Tough Requirements Exclude Many.” *Times Union*, Times Union, 16 Sept. 2019, www.timesunion.com/news/article/Excelsior-Scholarships-rise-20-percent-but-tough-14431051.php.

¹⁸ “Excelsior Scholarship Program.” *NYS Higher Education Services Corporation - The Excelsior Scholarship*, www.hesc.ny.gov/pay-for-college/financial-aid/types-of-financial-aid/nys-grants-scholarships-awards/the-excelsior-scholarship.html.

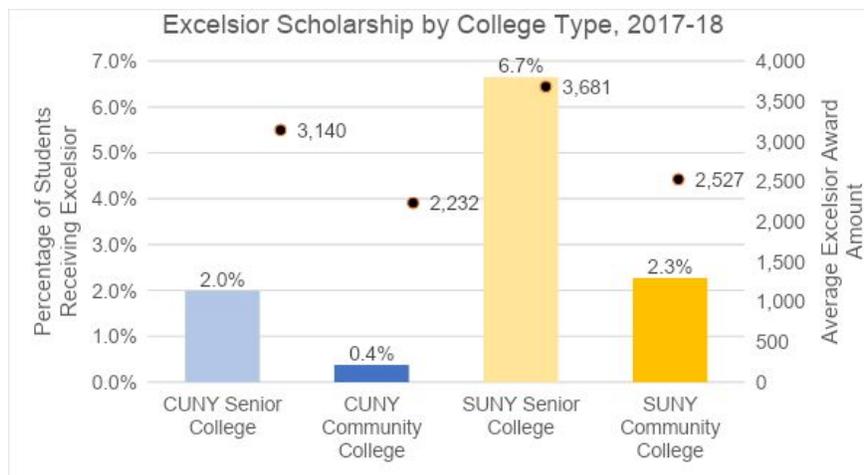
¹⁹ The Ups and Downs of Excelsior Scholarship’s Freshman Year and What Comes Next, see: <https://www.gothamgazette.com/columnists/other/130-opinion/8025-the-ups-and-downs-of-excelsior-scholarship-s-freshman-year-and-what-comes-next>

²⁰ Excelsior Scholarship Recipients and Dollars by College Code: Beginning 2017, see: <https://data.ny.gov/Education/Excelsior-Scholarship-Recipients-and-Dollars-by-Co/c7f2-hjqd>



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- **Excelsior hardly benefits community college students.**
 - Community college students barely reap the benefits of Excelsior, given that only 1.7% of students were awarded in 2017-18, compared to 4.6% of students at senior colleges. This is in part due to the rigid 30 credits per year requirement. Many community college students do not qualify to make full-time attendance, continuous enrollment, and deliver 30 credits each year.
- **Excelsior hardly benefits CUNY students.**
 - According to an article published in the Gotham Gazette, in 2017-18, the 18 CUNY colleges enrolled a 16.3% share of Excelsior scholarship recipients, with the balance of 83.7% of recipients attending SUNY colleges, even though CUNY students comprise 38.8% of the state's public student enrollment. The number of recipients is small at SUNY but minuscule at CUNY.²¹



Source: Gotham Gazette

- **We encourage the Governor and State Legislature to reconsider some of the requirements such as the 30-credits yearly, non-consideration for summer and winter classes, and part-time students, as well.**

ENHANCING SUPPORT SERVICES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

We appreciate the steady funding for CUNY LEADS in the Governor's proposal, which is a free and unique academic and career program for students with disabilities that offers job seeking/placement assistance, interview preparation, academic advisement, and more. However, CUNY has not received an

²¹ As Cuomo Proposes Excelsior Scholarship Expansion, 6 Things to Know About the Program, see: <https://www.gothamgazette.com/opinion/9090-cuomo-proposes-excelsior-scholarship-college-expansion-6-things-to-know>



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increase in its State funding for key reasonable accommodations and support services since 1993-1994. Over the last 25 years, the enrollment of CUNY students with disabilities has increased by more than 50 percent, while due to inflation, the purchasing power of CUNY's disability services base allocation has eroded by more than 50 percent.

CUNY LEADS is beneficial and should be expanded considering 70 percent of participants achieve competitive employment within 18 months of graduation. The program currently has the capacity to serve only 2,000 students with disabilities. According to the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs at CUNY, an additional \$1,000,000 would enable CUNY LEADS to secure additional advisors and job developers. Job developers can match employers seeking to diversify their workforces with educated, prepared and screened candidates with disabilities.

- **Additional funding for CUNY LEADS would double the number of eligible students served to 4,000, drawing from the University's more than 11,000 students with disabilities, including the growing number of veterans with disabilities.**